

Public Service: Making a Difference in America's Future

Based on Remarks by
The Honorable David M. Walker
Comptroller General of the United States
Before the School of
Public and Environmental Affairs
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana

May 4, 2001

I'm a big fan of Theodore Roosevelt, our 26th President. TR was an internationalist, environmentalist, and trust buster. He is also the only person to have won both the Congressional Medal of Honor and the Nobel Peace Prize—a true Renaissance man.

In the 1870s, TR told his Harvard fraternity brothers, “I am going to try to help the cause of better government ... but I don't know exactly how.” We must increase the number of people who have a similar passion for public service. We need more people who will take to heart President John F. Kennedy's famous challenge, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.”

Why? Because our federal government is an important and impressive institution. It represents about one-fifth of the domestic economic. In addition, the United States qualifies as the only superpower on earth, with significant economic, political, military, and cultural influence. We need top-flight people to run what is arguably the most important entity on earth. How can one person make a difference and contribute to a better America?

Cynics are fond of saying one person can't make a difference, but they're wrong. Let me tell you a brief story about one public servant, an employee of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), who proved the cynics wrong.

A new drug appeared on the market in West Germany in 1957. Prescribed as a sedative, the drug soon became popular among pregnant women as a remedy for morning sickness. The pill was cheap and thought to be safe. Tests in laboratory animals had been uneventful. The new drug was called thalidomide. Coincidentally, doctors soon began to see a sharp rise in the number of babies born with severe deformities, including stunted arms and legs.

In 1960, a drug company applied to market thalidomide in the United States. Many expected the drug to win easy FDA approval. FDA assigned the thalidomide application to a new medical reviewer, a woman by the name of Frances Kelsey.

Dr. Kelsey was skeptical of the drug company's claims about the safety of its product. When the company couldn't answer her questions about how thalidomide actually worked in the human body, Dr. Kelsey stuck to her guns and refused to approve the drug.

During the 1950s and 60s, more than 10,000 thalidomide babies were born in 46 countries. But Dr. Kelsey's vigilance spared our country a tragedy. Countless American babies would grow up healthy and whole because of the efforts of a single woman. She made a difference then, and, believe it or not, at age 86 she continues her life's work at FDA today.

Many public servants, including the dedicated professionals at GAO, are making a difference as well. GAO is in the legislative branch of government. We perform audits, investigations, program evaluations, policy analyses, and a range of legal services for Congress. We work with Congress to improve the performance and ensure the accountability of the federal government for the benefit of the American people. Simply put, GAO tries to help government work better for all Americans.

As TR once said, "I acted for the common well being of all our people." That's what we at GAO and others in public service try to do as well. We look out for what is in the collective best interest of all rather than the narrow interest of the few. We keep our eye on the so-called "greater good." This loyalty to the greater good is one thing that can never be privatized.

Yes, part of GAO's job is to point out the shortcomings in government programs and policies. The scope of our mission encompasses every area the federal government is involved in, anywhere in the world. This is a full-time job, and there is no risk of our role becoming obsolete. However, if we're going to increase the public's respect for and confidence in their government, we can't focus just on what is wrong with government. We also have to acknowledge what government does well, from defending our nation to promoting free trade to getting the Social Security checks out on time. And we have to help government improve.

The complexity and diversity of functions in the federal government are mind boggling today. Although government does some things well, it faces several major performance and accountability challenges. GAO

summarized many of them in its latest High-Risk/Performance and Accountability Series (Jan. 2001), which is available on GAO's website at www.gao.gov. The federal government also confronts a host of emerging issues. For example:

- Thirty-nine million seniors and disabled persons rely on their Social Security checks to help ensure a decent standard of living. The Social Security Administration (SSA) has won several customer service awards and is generally a well-run agency. However, both the Social Security and Medicare programs face serious, long-range financing challenges. The costs associated with Medicare and other health programs are only going up—a trend that will place increasing pressures on the federal budget. In addition, SSA, like many other federal agencies, faces a range of human capital challenges that must be addressed.
- The recently enacted welfare reform legislation, known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, has cut welfare cases in half nationwide and has helped many people to move from welfare to work. However, we now face the challenge of dealing with the chronically unemployed in a softening economy.
- Mainly through the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the government spends about \$22 billion a year on biomedical research. More than 80 Nobel prizes have been awarded to research sponsored by NIH. At the same time, we need to better coordinate, target, and evaluate the billions of dollars that the federal government spends on research and assistance each year.
- The Postal Service delivers the mail and helps link our country together. However, the Postal Service is facing escalating losses and a range of structural challenges that must be addressed if it is to successfully meet its mission in the years ahead.
- And last, but certainly not least, our military defends our country and protects America's interests abroad. Our armed forces deserve an "A" on effectiveness. They're the best in the world at fighting and winning armed conflicts. At the same time, the Defense Department (DOD) earns a "D+" on economy, efficiency, and accountability. DOD needs to transform the way it does business to free up funds for readiness, improve the quality of life for our troops, and invest in new technology.

In the 21st century, our government will face countless challenges—some that are long standing, others that are just emerging. We need top talent to meet these challenges, especially given the significant percentage of the federal workforce that will be retiring within the next few years.

GAO has identified several key trends in the years ahead that will shape our society and define America's role in the world. Among these trends are increased globalization; changing demographics; different security threats in a post-Cold War world; rapidly evolving technologies; rising health care costs; the movement from the industrial age to the knowledge age; and various quality-of-life issues, including education, the environment, and work and family issues. We are also seeing an increase in the devolution of government functions and the outsourcing of government services.

Our nation is in a time of transition. With the new millennium, we have a new administration, a new Congress, a new knowledge-based economy, and a temporary reprieve from budget deficits. However, according to GAO's long-range budget simulation model, known demographic trends and rising health care costs will likely return us to the days of deficits in the years ahead. We have a window of opportunity for government to reassess what it does and how it does business in the 21st century. The so-called X and Y generations have a lot at stake in ensuring that government does engage in this fundamental reexamination.

Ignorance and apathy are not options. As individuals, we must be informed and involved to make a difference. My concern is that if the X and Y generations don't become more involved in the key challenges facing our country, they'll pay a big price in the future for failing to act. Namely, they'll face higher tax burdens, lower government benefits, and less government flexibility to respond to evolving needs after the baby boomers retire.

The simple but powerful truth is that effective government demands a quality workforce. Government needs the best and the brightest graduates to tackle the problems it faces today and those that loom on the horizon. We cannot afford to do otherwise.

Ultimately, the choice of public service is one grounded in personal values rather than market values. Public service attracts people who seek to maximize their self-worth rather than their net worth, people who focus more on the word “we” rather than the word “me.”

We at GAO have three core values—accountability, integrity, and reliability. If you come to Washington, you’ll see them over the entrance to the GAO Building. They’re also on our letterhead, business cards, and blue report covers. These core values describe not only the nature of our work but also the character of our people. They represent our institutional beliefs and boundaries. They also speak to the kind of people we must hire in the future.

Opting for public service is an honorable choice. Public service offers an opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those who you know best, as well as those who you’ll never have a chance to meet. It’s a calling, where individuals and teams are capable of changing the future. That is why, 40 years later, people still talk of Dr. Frances Kelsey and her fateful decision.

In the United States of America, individuals with a good education, solid character, a strong work ethic, and a positive attitude have unlimited potential. In my opinion, every American should make a meaningful contribution to our country and our society during their lifetime. This can be done in various ways, both inside and outside of government, and at various stages of life.

How can you help the cause of a better America and a better world? Public service offers you one possible answer. Irrespective of which course you take, government or the private and not-for-profit sectors, do your best to make a real and lasting difference. And remember, as TR said, “aggressive fighting for the right [cause] is the noblest sport the world affords.”

BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID M. WALKER

David M. Walker became the seventh Comptroller General of the United States and began his 15-year term when he took his oath of office on November 9, 1998. As Comptroller General, Mr. Walker is the nation's chief accountability officer and the head of the General Accounting Office (GAO), a legislative branch agency founded in 1921. GAO helps Congress maximize the performance and ensure the accountability of the federal government for the benefit of the American people.

Immediately prior to his appointment as Comptroller General, Mr. Walker was a partner and global managing director of Arthur Andersen LLP's human capital services practice and a member of the board of Arthur Andersen Financial Advisors, a registered investment advisor. He also served as a Public Trustee for Social Security and Medicare from 1990 to 1995, while he was a partner with Arthur Andersen. Before joining Arthur Andersen, Mr. Walker was Assistant Secretary of Labor for Pension and Welfare Benefit Programs and Acting Executive Director for the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation. His earlier technical, professional, and business experience was gained with Price Waterhouse, Coopers & Lybrand, and with Source Services Corporation. Mr. Walker is a certified public accountant. He has a B.S. degree in accounting from Jacksonville University and a Senior Management in Government Certificate in Public Policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He is married to the former Mary Etheredge, and they have two adult children—a daughter, Carol, and a son, Andy.

**For more information about GAO,
visit our website at**

WWW.GAO.GOV

**441 G Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20548**